DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 253 CG 021 035

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TITLE Coping with Remarriage: The First Two Years.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (34th, New Orleans, LA, March 31-April 2, 1988). For related documents, see CG 021 035-039.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Adolescent Development; *Adolescents; Comparative Analysis; Coping; Divorce; *Family Relationship; Longitudinal Studies; *Nuclear Family; *One Parent Family; *Preadolescents; Remarriage; *Stepfamily

ABSTRACT

It has been estimated that about 30% of children will spend some time in a stepfamily and that 10% of children will experience two divorces of the custodial parent before they are 16 years of age. While there exists a substantial amount of research on divorce, there is a paucity of studies on remarriage. A longitudinal study was conducted to examine changes in family roles, relationships, and functioning in the first 2.5 years following remarriage. Family interaction patterns and the adjustment of early adolescent children in three types of families (stepfather families; nondivorced families; and families with a divorced, non-remarried custodial mother) were examined. Factors associated with children's successful coping or vulnerability to adverse effects of their parents' marital transitions were explored. Target children were between the ages of 9 and 13 at the beginning of the study. Stepfamilies were assessed three times, once in the first 7 months following remarriage, and again at approximately 16 and 26 months following remarriage. Other subjects were assessed at approximately comparable time periods. At the beginning of the study there were 202 families fairly evenly distributed across family groups and male and female target children. By the third assessment, there were 164 families still participating in the study. Each assessment involved a large set of interview, observational, and standardized test measures. (Results of the study are reported in the four documents that follow.) (NB)

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# Coping with Remarriage: The First Two Years

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CG 021035

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## Introduction

Marital transitions have become increasingly common experiences in the lives of adults and children. The divorce rate almost triples between 1965 and 1980. Although the divorce rate began to level off in 1981, it is estimated that between 40 and 50 percent of couples marrying in the 1970's and 1980's will eventually divorce and that sixty percent of these divorces will involve children. Following divorce, most children find themselves residing in a one parent mother headed family, since in less than ten percent of divorces do fathers gain custody of their children. However, this usually is a temporary condition since about 75% of women and 80% of men remarry. About 30% of children will spend some time in a stepfamily before they reach the age of 18. However, since the divorce rate is higher in remarriages than first marriages, some children and parents experience a succession of divorces and periods of time in a one parent household. One out of every 10 children will experience two divorces of the custodial parent before they are sixteen. The way family members adapt to each transition will be, to some extent, influenced by experiences in previous family situations. The response to divorce will be influenced by experiences in the initial marriage and responses to remarriage will be affected not

only by the first marriage and divorce, but also by having lived in a single parent household.

In the past fifteen years there has been an accumulating body of relatively well designed research, including longitudinal studies, focussed on the impact of divorce on the adjustment of parents and children and on the role of changing life experiences and family relations that mediate positive or negative outcomes for family members following divorce(Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Forgatch, 1986; Hetherington, 1987). It has been found that in the period immediately surrounding separation and divorce, most family members experience emotional distress and disrupted functioning. However, if the aftermath of divorce is not compounded by continued or additional stressors, both parents and children are able to adapt to their new life situation within two to three years following divorce. The adverse effects of divorce are more intense and enduring for boys than for girls, although there have been some reports of delayed effects in the form of rebellious behavior, depression and disruptions in heterosexual relations emerging in adolescent girls (Hetherington, 1972; Wallerstein, 1986). Moreover, when differences between children in divorced and nondivorced families are found they are most likely to be obtained in externalizing disorders involving poor impulse control, aggression, and noncompliance and in achievement deficits for both boys and girls rather than in internalizing disorders or disruptions in self-esteem. Finally, when such behaviors occur they tend to be found not only in the home but also in the school and in peer relations

and are correlated with inept parenting on the part of the custodial parent (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Forgatch 1986). It should be kept in mind that most of the studies of divorce involve mother custody homes and it has been found that elementary school aged children manifest fewer behavior problems when they are in the custody of a parent of the same sex (Warshak & Santrock, 1983; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Zill, in press).

In contrast to the substantial research literature on divorce, there is a paucity of studies on remarriage. The available research indicates that although the behavior of both boys and girls initially may be disrupted by the addition of a stepparent to the family, young boys often benefit from the presence of a stepfather. However, several studies have reported that girls have more long term difficulty adjusting to either a stepfather or stepmother than do boys and that they show more behavior problems than do girls in nondivorced families (Bray, 1986; Brand, Clingempeel & Woodward, 1986; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1985). Furthermore, younger children or older adolescents and young adults more readily accept and benefit from a stepparent than do early adolescents. The age period from nine to fifteen seems to be a particularly difficult one in which to gain acceptance of a remarriage and stepparent by children (Hetherington, Arnett, Hollier, in press). Finally, the relationships and behaviors within the family that mediate positive or negative outcomes for children are sometimes found to differ in nondivorced and remarried families. For example, several studies report that in nondivorced families, a close

marital relationship is associated with positive parent child relations and low rates of behavior problems in children, however in contrast, in remarried families a close marital relation has found to be associated with more parent child conflict, less acceptance of a stepparent by the stepchild and higher rates of behavior problems.

Today we are going to present some of the results of a longitudinal study designed to examine changes in family roles, relationships and functioning in the first two and a half years following remarriage. Family interaction patterns and the adjustment of early adolescent children in three types of families, i.e. stepfather families, nondivorced families and families with a divorced non remarried custodial mother will be reported. Finally, factors associated with children's successful coping or vulnerability to adverse effects of their parents' marital transitions in the two and a half years following remarriage will be examined.

The parents in all families in this study were caucasian, and had at least a high school education. Each family had one child who was the target child in the study and was between the age of 9 and 13 at the beginning of the study and families had no more than four children. In the stepfather families, the mother had been previously married only once. All children residing in the stepfamilies were those of the mothers from her first marriage. Remarried mothers and divorced non remarried mothers had been divorced for the same length of time, approximately 4 1/2 years. Stepfamilies were assessed three times during the two

and a half years following remarriage at an average of 4 months post remarriage. Time 1 was in the first seven months following remarriage, time two was at an average of 16 months following remarriage and time 3 was at an average of 26 months following remarriage. The nondivorced group of families and the families with a divorced non remarried custodial mother were assessed at approximately comparable time periods. At wave one there were 202 families fairly evenly distributed across family groups and male and female target children. By wave 3 there were 164 families still participating in the study. Unfortunately, the assessment battery used on the families with a divorced non remarried custodial mother was truncated and included neither the observational measures nor the child report of sibling relations.

Each assessment involved a large set of interview, observational and standardized test measures. Measures were selected and constructed so that similar information was collected from different sources or informants and by different methods. Thus, information on parenting was collected from parents' and children's reports and from observations of parents and children interacting. Information on childrens' behavior was collected from parents' and children's interviews, reports and a 24-hour behavior checklist, from parents' and teachers' responses on the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, from parents' and children's reports on a Child Competence Inventory and from observations of the child interacting with mother, father or stepfather and siblings. Similarly, marital relations were assessed through parent reports on the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment

Scale, interviews and observations. For the most part interviews were highly structured and focussed on how often a specific behavior thought to measure a construct of interest in the study had occurred in a fixed period of time. Central constructs involved parental warmth, control, monitoring, discipline, conflict and children's prosocial, externalizing or internalizing behavior and positivity and negativity in interactions.

Observations were made at the dinner table and in family problem solving sessions. In a preliminary interview family problem areas and areas of conflict were identified separately by family members. These problems were later discussed by father-mother, mother-child, father/stepfather-child, and sibling, dyads, and in triads composed of the child, mother and father or stepfather. A series of 5 point global rating scales designed to measure various aspects of parents' and children's behavior and family functioning were rated at the end of each dyadic, triadic and dinner table interaction. Each family member's behavior toward every other family member was rated. Finally, an overall rating of behaviors between family members was made based on the observations across all family problem solving sessions and the dinner table interactions.

Most data reduction was done through confirmatory factor analysis across multiple data sources yielding composite factors of parents and children's behavior and children's adjustment. However, as is frequently found, different perceptions of what was going on in the family often occurred, especially between parents and children, and family member's reports did not always

concur with observed behavior. In such cases, these data sets were analyzed separately. Further details on methodology will be presented in the individual papers.

In listening to the papers that follow, several points should be kept in mind.

First, these are early adolescent children and many changes are occuring in these children that may be unrelated to or may interact with their parents' marital status. The changes in these children may be related to entry into adolescence as as well as adaptation to remarriage. In past studies, early adolescent children have been found to be particularly resistant to the introduction of a stepparent and some of the findings in this study may be specific to this age group.

Second, single parent households in this study are mother custody families and the stepfamilies are stepfather families. These custodial and stepfamily arrangements may not generalize to father custody families or to other stepfamily structures.

Finally, the divorced non remarried families are what we might call stabilized one parent families. The parents have been divorced for 4 1/2 years and are well beyond the initial two to three year crisis period following divorce. In contrast, the stepfamilies are going through this initial period of adjustment and are trying to establish functional and gratifying rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships within the family.

In the first paper by Ann Hollier, parent child relationships, as reported in interviews, and their changes over time in the three family groups will be examined.

In the second paper by Peggy Hagan and Jimmy Deal, changes and consistency in observed family interactions from dyads to triads will be presented. This paper will focus on modifications in the interactions of a dyad following the introduction of a third family member.

In the third paper by Edward Anderson, relationships in the three family groups between the target child and his/her sibling closest in age will be examined.

Finally, the last paper by Marjorie Lindner and Edward Anderson will deal with changes in the adjustment of children over time in the three family types and with factors that enhance positive adjustment or that are associated with deleterious outcomes for children.